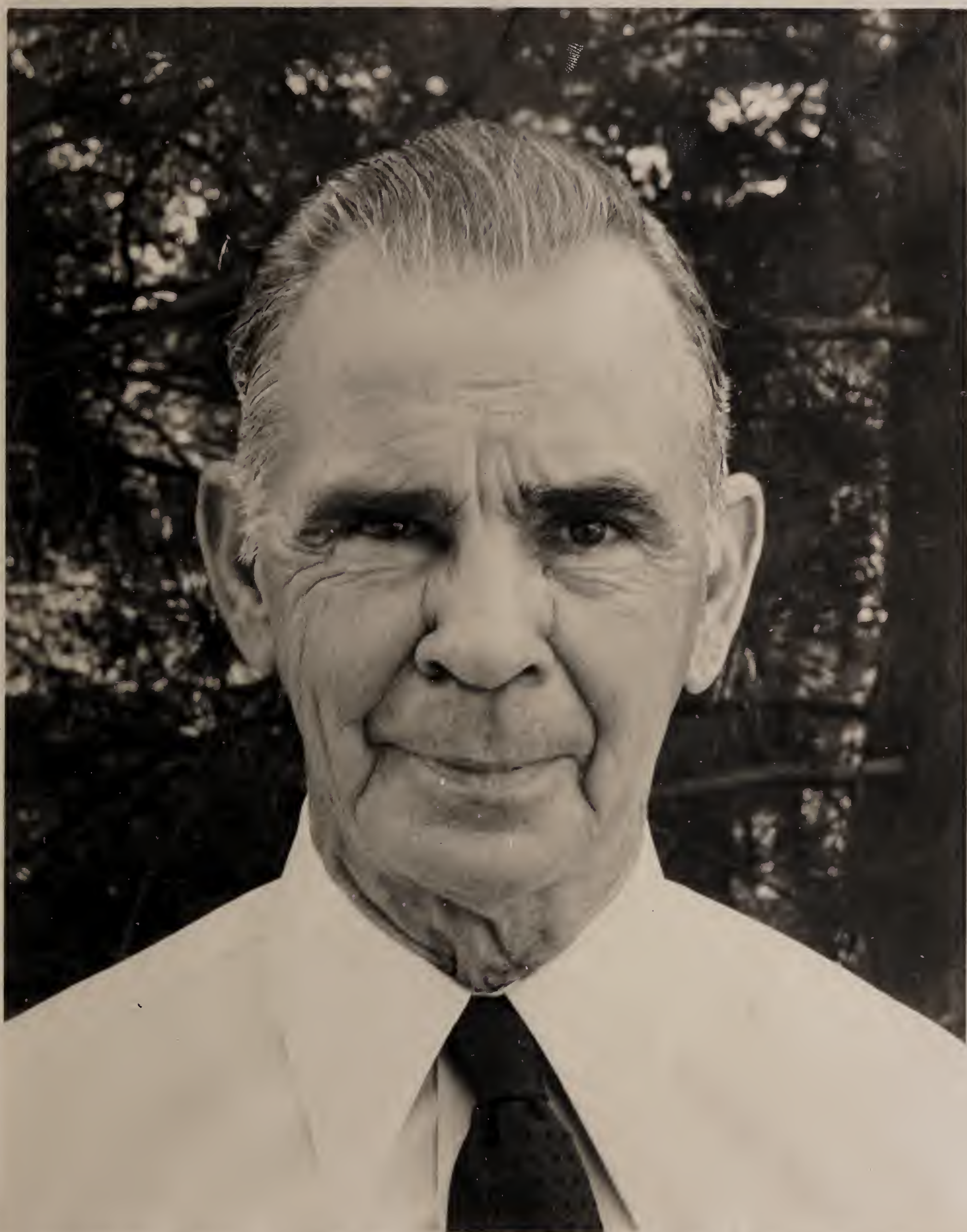


JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LESTER J. STEVENS

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JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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Interviewers

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6/19/75
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June 19/75
(date)

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INTERVIEWER: Jay Honrud

INTERVIEWEE: Lester J. Stevens

INTERVIEWER: This is an interview with Mr. Lester J. Stevens at his home for the Oral History Project for Joliet Junior College by Jay Honrud on June 19, 1975, at 10:30 in the morning.

HONRUD: Mr. Stevens, where did you begin teaching?

STEVENS: In Indiana in 1926.

HONRUD: And when did you come to Wilmington?

STEVENS: The Fall of 1929.

HONRUD: What did you first teach?

STEVENS: Science, Physics, Biology and General Science.

HONRUD: Were you ever a principal?

STEVENS: Yes, I was principal in name under Mr. Booth. I also coached grade school basketball and high school basketball and baseball for three years. Mr. Booth was elected County Superintendent, and I replaced him as superintendent.

HONRUD: When was that?

STEVENS: 1935

HONRUD: I see. You said you coached. Were you active in sports when you were younger?

STEVENS: I played basketball and baseball in high school and

went out for football and basketball in college. I coached three years in Indiana before I came here in the fall of 1929.

HONRUD: Great. Were you familiar with this area then?

STEVENS: Yes, I was born and raised at Gardner, Illinois.

HONRUD: Were there any particular influences that made you settle in Wilmington?

STEVENS: I always liked Wilmington since the days we played Wilmington in baseball the four years I was in high school at Gardner. Wilmington was a pretty town, and I always thought if I had the opportunity I would like to teach here. My wishes were granted!

HONRUD: That's great. What was the school like when you first came? Where was it?

STEVENS: It was an old three-story brick building located in the center of the block where Central School now stands. There were 97 students in high school and 225 in the elementary and only 5 teachers, not counting Mr. Booth, the Superintendent. A gym and three classrooms were erected under Mr. Booth's supervision in 1925. Due to the condition the old building was in, a new one was necessary. This was completed in 1936. Since that time, several additions have been added to the north wing.

HONRUD: Did he teach also?

STEVENS: Yes.

HONRUD: Superintendents taught then?

STEVENS: Yes, back in those days it was also necessary to teach due to financial conditions.

HONRUD: When you first came, what was it like teaching? As far as the winter, how did you heat the place? Things like this.

STEVENS: Coal furnaces and steam heat were used. Classes were smaller which gave the teacher an opportunity of becoming better acquainted with each student. When the enrollment increased from 300 to 2200, it was much harder to keep the close personal teacher-student relationship we had before; but this goes with progress, I suppose.

HONRUD: Was there any special conduct for teachers? Tell us about that.

STEVENS: Yes, there were special requirements. Speaking for myself, I was asked about my habits. Did I smoke? or drink? -- questions like these were asked. Since a social drink once in a while was no problem and never being a heavy smoker, it was very easy to confine my smoking to my room. I had a room with the Fred Cassingham family for seven years until I was married. It was always my belief that to set an example for young people you had to be one first.

HONRUD: That's for sure. Could a teacher be married?

STEVENS: Yes, a teacher could be married. This was no issue

at one time, because a good teacher was hard to find. Then when teachers became more plentiful, of course, jobs became scarce, so we had to change the ruling on married teachers to make jobs for unmarried teachers. It hardly seemed fair for a husband and wife in a family to hold down two jobs when so many single people needed a teaching position.

HONRUD: How far did the kids come from?

STEVENS: At that time, we were a local district - District #9 which included the town only. A unit district was formed in 1949 -- Wilmington - Lorenzo Community Unit. It was about four years later that Florence Township, which was in non - high territory, came into the district.

HONRUD: How did the change come about? Can you tell us any problems you encountered or things like this? The townspeople -- what they thought?

STEVENS: The enrollment in the school remained stable for quite a few years until the Plant came in 1942. Then it went by leaps and bounds. We got so crowded we had classrooms every place you could think of that would be halfway suitable for a classroom -- such as the Presbyterian church basement. We had double sessions one year for grades 1-8. The Government built two schools for us -- Brookside -- which housed the first three grades for the Brookside area, and Northcrest School the first three grades for that area. Later, we rented the Administration Building at Northcrest area

and had Home Economics and Agriculture out there. We bought the Hazzard property which consisted of 20 acres for a new high school and later the Ryan property adjoining it which was 11 acres. The new high school was built, and we moved into it in 1954. Then the Junior High was built on the south end of the high school. There was an addition to the Junior High and also additional rooms at Central School. Our enrollment increased from approximately 300 students to nearly 2200 students.

HONRUD: I bet it kept you busy.

STEVENS: Yes, it really kept us busy.

HONRUD: While you were superintendent, did you teach in the classroom for a while?

STEVENS: Yes, I taught three years after I was superintendent; however, it was Biology and General Science, and previous to that, I had taught Physics.

HONRUD: I see. When the old three-story high school was torn down and what is now Central School was built, where did the kids go to school during the time?

STEVENS: We made the transition during the middle of the year. We used the old school until the new one was completed.

HONRUD: What did kids do for entertainment? Were there clubs and things?

STEVENS: We had our athletic program which consisted of baseball and basketball. Football was introduced by Ray Sparlin, the first football coach. He was quite responsible for getting football started. The classes always had parties; and there were certain clubs and, of course, the prom. As we expanded, we had more teachers and more students, so additional clubs were initiated.

HONRUD: Did Wilmington always have pretty good teams?

STEVENS: Yes, we have had some real good teams in the various sports. If you have the material, you are all right. Some years are better than others, and it seems to run in cycles.

HONRUD: Was there a band?

STEVENS: The Parent-Teachers' Association was responsible for getting our band started. District #9 was a small district, and funds were very limited. The only sources of revenue was taxes and what we received from non-high board for tuition for non-high pupils. We saw some very difficult times during the depression. Later we secured funds from the Federal Government under Public Law 874 and for building purposes under Public Law 815. We also qualified for state aid. All of these sources were helpful; yet, it was a struggle and a lot of hard work from the very beginning because the way things increased and the town changed.

HONRUD: How did the town change?

STEVENS: The town increased in population, and government homes

were built in the Northcrest and Brookside areas. The population increased to about 5,000 people in town, and houses and living quarters were hard to secure. Rentals increased, and with the growth, the community had to change.

HONRUD: Have kids changed much?

STEVENS: Not too much. Most students like to have discipline, and if you are going to teach, it is essential. You don't accomplish much without it. If you treat students fair, they will respond in the same manner. I always felt we had good discipline throughout the school system.

HONRUD: Has it changed?

STEVENS: Yes. If you touch a youngster in school today, you might end up in court. The great majority of the youngsters are fine. There are always a few that don't want to go along, and this has to be corrected. I think the pendulum is swinging back in the right direction, as most people want good discipline maintained; and parents want their youngsters to have the best education that is possible.

HONRUD: I heard that sometimes for a prank the kids would put stuff on top of Central School.

STEVENS: Yes, students pulled off various pranks. Guess that is typical from the beginning of schools.

HONRUD: Can you tell us some of the things they did?

STEVENS: There used to be two beautiful elm trees standing at the entrance of Central School. Some of the students, at Halloween, would suspend a toilet between the two elms. Generally, I had an idea who the instigators were and would say to them "take it away, boys", and that was it. One could go along with pranks as long as they were not destructive. It was never anything too serious.

HONRUD: Did you ever have to suspend a kid?

STEVENS: No, I wasn't a believer in using suspensions in disciplinary action. I generally took care of the matter when it happened. However, as times changed, some students would be suspended. The principal could suspend a student, but the Board had to expel if the case was serious enough. That didn't occur too many times.

HONRUD: What did you do if you caught them fighting?

STEVENS: I had a special treatment of my own. I used to make them kiss and make up. That would make them feel rather foolish, and we didn't have too many fights after this treatment had been witnessed several times.

HONRUD: Is there anything you'd like to say?

STEVENS: I enjoyed my 37 years of teaching and administering here at Wilmington. It was a lot of hard work, but it was worth it. The Boards of Education and the people in the community were very fine. Citizens stood behind us 100% when we asked for buildings, etc. This was very gratifying. The Board of Education's policy

was to give the boys and girls the best education we possibly could, and our relationship with the County and State was excellent because we were all working for one purpose -- the education of our youth. If I had it to do over again, I would not change my profession, as I truly enjoyed working with teachers, students and people in the community.

HONRUD: Can you think of anyone that contributed anything in a special area at the school? Anyone stand out in your mind?

STEVENS: When you have a good Board of Education and a staff of good teachers, you are most fortunate. The teachers make the school. People in the community backed us. With all this, we still had problems, but they could be solved. I have always given a great deal of credit to all the people with whom I worked; otherwise, we couldn't have come as far as we did.

HONRUD: Have the courses in school changed much?

STEVENS: Courses have been added as the schools expanded. In the early days, the program of studies was just the fundamentals. You knew what subjects you would have in your four years of high school. These were required subjects that had to be taken for graduation and college. Now, there are a number of electives a student can take, and this gives the student a better chance and a better rounded-type of education. All students are not the same, and these elective courses have been very helpful to many students. The idea that every boy and girl should have a college

education is dying out somewhat. They should be able to prepare themselves in high school so they can earn a living after graduation.

HONRUD: How does it feel to have the school named in your honor?

STEVENS: I was surprised and very proud they thought enough of me to name the school after me.

HONRUD: Can you single out anything that was the high point of your years in education?

STEVENS: I cannot single out any one thing, but a number of things. Courses being added to the program of studies, building programs, increased number of teachers, increased revenues.....all of these things made it possible to give the boys and girls a better type of education than what they were receiving from just the required subjects.

HONRUD: What was most challenging as an educator?

STEVENS: Room and finances. They were the greatest challenges I was confronted with. It has been the last few years that teachers' salaries have the money and the room, it is very difficult to run a good educational program.

HONRUD: What would you like to see changed most in education today?

STEVENS: I think they are coming back to it. By having courses for all youngsters that will equip them with skills enabling them to pursue an occupation to their liking. Also, giving the school administrators

more authority in handling discipline cases. Maybe, if I thought about it longer, I might come up with something different.

HONRUD: Thank you very much, Mr. Stevens.

STEVENS: Now, whether or not this has been worthwhile or has helped you in any way, I have enjoyed visiting with you and reminiscing just a little.

HONRUD: It's been great.

STEVENS: I guess when you get older, you go back and think about things that have happened. I have always said "look ahead; don't look back".

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